

**Testimony of CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY in support of Committee Bill 322, AN ACT CONCERNING THE QUALIFICATIONS OF DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EMPLOYEES, with suggested amendments**

The Center for Children's Advocacy is a non-profit legal organization for poor children, affiliated with the University of Connecticut School of Law. We provide legal representation to those children who fall through the cracks of the child welfare, health, mental health, education and juvenile justice systems.

Based upon our extensive experience with the child welfare system, the Center supports Bill No. 322, with certain amendments, for the following reasons:

**1) Requiring DCF Employees to have specific qualifications will improve practice standards and outcomes**

The child welfare system is designed to support families and to protect children from harm, based upon the principle of "best interests of the child." Numerous studies indicate that social work degrees are the most appropriate degrees for child welfare practice (Child Welfare League of America, 2003).<sup>1</sup> A social work educated workforce has been directly linked to better outcomes for children and families and to lower staff turnover in child welfare settings (NASW Standards/Child Welfare, 2005, p. 7).<sup>2</sup>

Social workers with degrees from schools of social work are more prepared to meet the demands of child welfare practice and to engage in practice consistent with the social work standard of care than employees who have had agency based training but not professional social work education. Social workers who are graduates of accredited BSW and MSW programs have had to demonstrate competencies in many areas critical to effective child welfare practice including assessment, cultural competence, ethical practice, client advocacy, and policy analysis among many others.

The Children's Bureau has identified deficiencies in child welfare agencies' abilities to assess 'needs' (Cohen, 2003),<sup>3</sup> reinforcing the importance for child welfare workers to have the knowledge and skills offered through social work and to have a workload and work environment that affords them the time to carry out these tasks. This is reinforced by a study by Pasztor, Saint-Germain, & DeCrescenzo (2002),<sup>4</sup> which found that "assessment of situations" was the critical skill identified as necessary for child welfare staff. Social work education provides the theoretical foundation and practice competencies to enable graduates to meet the demands for accurate assessment and interventions in the child welfare system.

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<sup>1</sup> Child Welfare League of America. (2003). *Moving from research to practice: Annotated bibliography, child welfare workforce*. <http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p/biblio.htm>

<sup>2</sup> National Association of Social Workers (2005). *Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare*. <http://www.naswdc.org/practice/standards/NASWChildWelfareStandards0905.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, E. (2003). *Getting the whole picture: CFSR, training and front-line practice*. Presentation at CALSWEC meeting, September 2003. Cited in: Professional Social Workers in Child Welfare Work: Research Addressing the Recruitment and Retention Dilemma. Social Work Policy Institute <http://www.socialworkpolicy.org/research/child-welfare-2.html>

<sup>4</sup> Pasztor, E., Saint-Germain, M. & DeCrescenzo, T. (April 2002). *Demand for social workers in California*. Available from California State University, Long Beach. [http://www.csus.edu/calst/government\\_Affairs/reports/Demand\\_for\\_Social\\_Workers.pdf](http://www.csus.edu/calst/government_Affairs/reports/Demand_for_Social_Workers.pdf)

Rittner and Wodarski (1999) examined the relationship between academic preparation of social workers and particular roles within the child welfare system.<sup>5</sup> They found that generalist skills taught in BSW programs prepare students for work as hot-line screeners, foster care case managers, and case workers with low-to-moderate risk families, and to recruit, screen, and train foster and adoptive parents. Skills taught in MSW programs are needed for conducting initial investigations, working with high risk families, terminating parental rights, placing children with adoptive families, and for administrative and supervisory functions.

Dr. Virginia Strand of Fordham University, Principal Investigator of the Child Welfare Staff Recruitment and Retention: An Evidence-Based Training Model (2007)<sup>6</sup> developed with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families concluded among other things that one key strategy to ensure higher competency levels is to require all workers assuming social work positions at the Department to have a degree in social work.

## **2) Increasing qualifications will improve retention of workers leading to improved staff performance:**

Research shows that higher retention among professional social workers in Child Welfare will:

- a. Avoid turnover and training costs for replacements
- b. Allow for more continuity for clients and fewer disruptions to their care
- c. Create an experienced staff with accumulated knowledge of the needs of children and families, the dynamics of family violence, the relevant legal and regulatory policies, as well as community resources critical to effective child welfare practice

According to a General Accounting Office study, the turnover rate of child welfare workers in the U.S. falls between 30 and 40 percent. Moreover, the average duration of employment is less than two years, (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Turnover in the child welfare workforce has strong implications for the well-being of children in care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003).

## **3) Increased qualifications will elevate the level of commitment to child welfare practice**

The degree to which job applicants have a career interest in child welfare was one of the key predictors of job satisfaction and retention (McGowan, Auerbach, Strolin-Goltzman).<sup>7</sup> Such a question is not usually explored in civil service examinations or agency hiring processes, yet the findings of this study suggest it may be a critical factor to examine when hiring child welfare workers (2009, p.235). Social work has a long history of involvement with the field of child welfare and opportunities to develop

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<sup>5</sup> Rittner, B., & Wodarski, J. (1999). Differential Uses for BSW and MSW Educated Social Workers in Child Welfare Services. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 21(3), 217-238.

<sup>6</sup> Strand, V. (2007). Child Welfare Staff Recruitment and Retention: An Evidence-Based Training Model: Fordham University Final Report. U.S. Dept. HHS, Administration for Children and Families website, [http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding\\_sources/sitevisits/ncarolina.cfm#page=summary](http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/sitevisits/ncarolina.cfm#page=summary)

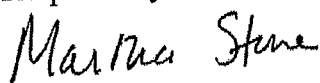
<sup>7</sup> McGowan, B. G., Auerbach, C., & Strolin-Goltzman, J. S. (2009). Turnover in the Child Welfare Workforce: A Different Perspective. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 35(3), 228-235.

specializations, certificate programs, and focused internship opportunities for social work students in Connecticut social work programs would likely follow the passage of this bill. This specialization would provide the state with a well prepared workforce of graduates who are committed to child welfare practice (O'Donnell and Kirkner, 2009).<sup>8</sup>

#### **Suggested Amendments to Current Statutory Language:**

Committee Bill 322, as written, unnecessarily leaves out BSW prepared social workers from the child welfare workforce. It also includes employees with degrees in a "closely related field," which is not appropriate and gives too much discretion to the Commissioner to determine. We advocate for amended language that would recognize the training and education of all those who graduate with a social work degree, and eliminate the "closely related field" language.

Respectfully submitted,



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<sup>8</sup> O'Donnell, J. and Kirkner, S. L. (2009). Title IV-E Programs: Preparing MSW Students for Public Child Welfare Practice. *Journal of Teaching In Social Work*, 29, 241-257.

